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AUTHOR(S):

Chen, Wenling

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My Personal Impression on Tibet Culture and Elderly Health

Wenling Chen

Department of Field Medicine, Kyoto University

Buddhism for Tibetan people was not only the dominant official ethnic religion but also principal philosophical identity, especially in Tibetan elderly highlanders. Tibetan elderly highlanders manage their health situation according to their beliefs about Tibetan Buddhism. These beliefs were constructed using both modern and traditional knowledge. For example, Tibetan elderly highlanders explained the cause of their illnesses as being due to biomedical factors such as genetics, and also cultural factors such as karma from either previous or current lifetimes. Several studies have illustrated how culture might affect the interpretation and experience of the illness. Tibetan elderly highlanders considered that illness and ageing were natural parts of the birth-and-death lifecycle. Disease was primarily regarded as the result of individual past karma (or action) in either past or current life. The definition of “Karma” or “Cause and Effect” meant that there were inescapable results of personal actions. Therefore, Tibetan elderly highlanders considered that their suffering and health situation were the result of their own previous karma. Tibetan Buddhism values (acceptance) and practices (mindfulness meditation) enhanced better age-related disease management and the cultural differences in the perceptions of disease in Tibetan elderly highlanders may assist a further progression in clinical management.

INTRODUCTION

Tibet has always been known as “The Roof of the World” .

Tibet attracted and enthralled visitors in the world, as visitors touched the magic of its mysteries, the altitude and scenery of Tibet were enough to take their breath away. Tibet had always maintained a distinct cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic identity. Situated on the remote Tibetan plateau at the center of Asia and its average altitude was over 4,000 meter. Tibetans possessed a strong sense of independent history that was linked to this distinct identity and particularly its relationship with Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism for Tibetan people was not only the dominant official ethnic religion but also principal philosophical identity, especially in Tibetan elderly highlanders.

AGE-RELATED DISEASE FOR TIBETAN ELDERLY HIGHLANDERS

The reality of old age and age-related chronic illness takes place in homes and communities. To truly understand the health issues of the elderly, geriatricians need to venture into communities and visit elderly

persons in their homes and cultural environments was reported.¹⁾ Understanding of the causes of disease of elderly came from notably genetic and advanced age was commonly attributed as the cause of the age-related disease.

In Tibetan Buddhism, illness and ageing were natural parts of the birth-and-death life cycle. Illness was primarily regarded as the result of an individual's past karma (or action) either in past or current life.²⁾ The definition of “Karma” or “Cause and Effect” meant that there were inescapable results of one's own actions. Thus, much of what one experienced was the result of individual previous karma. As a result of karma in a past life, Tibetan elderly highlanders believed that age-related disease was one kind of karma illness.

We have carried out a comprehensive geriatric survey in Tibet in 2011. We stayed in Tibet for several days, talking with local Tibetan elderly highlanders and listening from them how their health situation was affected by Tibetan Buddhism, especially in elderly. There were three samples of Tibetan elderly who talked about their daily life and how Tibet Buddhism affects their health situation.

SAMPLE 1: Meditation

Meditation was actively practicing of Tibetan elderly highlanders on a regular basis. Tibetan elderly highlanders believed that meditation as a potential approach for stress reduction, which was useful in managing age-related disease, and made them feel fulfillment.

"Sometimes I made merit. I chanted in the morning and evening. I did all of these at home if I can't go to temple. Chanting made me happy and calmed my mind." [male, 75]

SAMPLE 2: Acceptance and letting go

"Acceptance" and "letting go" were two fundamental Tibetan Buddhist principles and the meaning of those was reconciling the sufferings or illnesses in life. This principle made most of Tibetan elderly highlanders accepted the age-related disease and thought ageing was one of the nature part of life.

"... what will happen, will happen. If I was ill, I will see the monk or doctor and take medication. If the illness got worse and no longer curable, I die. We all die sooner or later." [female, 61]

SAMPLE 3: Exercise

Two advanced forms of Tibet Buddhism practice were mindfulness meditation and insight meditation. Some of Tibetan elderly highlanders meditated daily in their homes or temples. Mindfulness meditation was done while chanting and walking around the temple and it was the main activities for Tibetan elderly highlanders. Chanting practice effectively enhanced a sense of peacefulness and walking practice helped relieve body pain and increase physical activity.

"I liked the Buddhist way. Sometimes if I went to the temple for meditation, I'll make wish for my family and myself. Walking meditation also helps me to relieve physical pain... and it was an exercise habit for me, too." [male, 70]

CONCLUSION

Age-related disease caused by either biological (e.g.,

old age or genetic) or culture environments (result of previous Karma), aspects of Tibet culture influenced the perception and management of age-related disease.³⁻⁸⁾ Tibetan elderly highlanders believed that Tibetan Buddhism promoted psychological well-being and a better life if they followed Tibetan Buddhism principles. Tibet with distinct culture and it made Tibetan elderly highlanders considered that their age-related disease was a nature part of life and accepted it. The ideas of Tibetan Buddhism may promote elderly health prevention or treatment a further progression in clinical management.

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